

County signs on to green energy program

Updated August 30, 2016 8:49 PM

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THE SOLAR ARRAY ON THE ROOFTOP OF BRINKMANN TRUE VALUE HARDWARE IN MILLER PLACE, A STORE THAT PRODUCES MORE ENERGY THAN IT ACTUALLY USES. (CREDIT: BRINKMANN ENTERPRISES)

Suffolk this week became the largest municipality in the state to sign on to the program by joining the Energy Improvement Corp., a public authority that's overseeing the Energize NY program. The Suffolk Legislature approved the county's plan in November. Nassau County is expected to join in the fall after approving legislation earlier this month.

The Energize NY program addresses a drawback of clean energy programs by eliminating big upfront payments or higher-interest private bank loans to fund the upgrades.

Instead, business and not-for-profit groups can borrow up to 10 percent of the value of their properties to pay for energy-saving upgrades and repairs, at interest rates of 4.25 percent to 5.5 percent.

The energy savings more than offset the new assessments on their property-tax bills through the so-called property-assessed clean energy (PACE) financing, said Mark Thielking, executive director of Energize NY.

The funding can be used for a long list of energy-related improvements and equipment, including new solar panels, geothermal energy systems, fuel cells, even wind turbines. Efficiency measures such as better insulation, energy efficient motors and energy-saving boilers and heating and air-conditioning systems also are eligible.

"Most of our building stock is wasting a lot of money on unnecessary energy and fuel costs," Thielking said. "The buildings can be improved to stop wasting those dollars and reinvest the money in other areas of business."

One Westchester company that signed onto the program now gets all of its energy from new solar panels, eliminating its electricity bill, while repaying a loan through its taxes at an amount that's considerably lower than its former energy bill. The company also received a 30 percent federal tax credit and a state subsidy that pays 20 percent of the system's cost.

Officials said 30 projects are already in the pipeline in Suffolk.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said in a statement the energy reductions and cost savings could help businesses “stay on Long Island and potentially expand and create more skilled jobs both directly in the energy efficiency and solar sectors, and indirectly in all other sectors of our economy.”

Bellone and Suffolk’s director of sustainability, Dorian Dale, were among the first in the nation to use property-assessed clean energy financing when they worked together at Babylon Town a decade ago, Bellone as supervisor and Dale as energy director.

Local green-energy companies say they expect a boost from the program.

Mike Bailis, co-founder of SUNation Solar Systems in Ronkonkoma, said his company has been marketing the program since the county passed legislation.

“I expect the commercial business because of PACE to increase anywhere from 25 to 50 percent,” he said. “It makes commercial installation extremely cost effective. It’s absolutely painless. It’s getting all your savings up front instead of waiting for it.”

Date: August 31, 2016

URL: <http://www.newsday.com/long-island/suffolk-county-signs-on-to-green-energy-program-for-business-1.12243982>